

# Gawan and the Green Knight

I managed, to my surprise, to start a small fire with the iron pyrites and a bit of dry moss from my pouch. I am usually too good at this sort of thing – I can set a conflagration in moments – but the Redeemer must have heard my prayer. Or my teeth chattering. I fed the tiny flame with dry leaves, cupping the delicate fire flare, then found some twigs, and, as the night got darker and colder, built it up to a reasonable size where I could warm myself. My feet were still unpleasantly damp and I decided that removing my boots would be unwise, especially with the rime of frost and pockets of snow around me.

When I felt I could leave the fire without it fizzling out, I got up, and searched through my saddle bags. I'd already led my fractious stallion to the nearby stream and fed him the few wisps of hay and shriveled apples I had left.

*"Take care of your horse and your men, before yourself, my son. And if it means that there is no food left for you, why, it is better that those who cannot ask should eat first. You are noble blood, you can survive a little hardship, my son." She had many suggestions of this kind, my mother. I'd have liked to hear her try them on my father. Or perhaps she did, which is why he died in a far-off land...*

I found stale bread, suspiciously dry meat, a greyish lump of cheese and my water bottle, which held a mix of brackish water and sour wine. I wasn't certain I wanted to drink it, but it'd be safer than plain water.

*I've learnt a lot on my way. And none of it told me exactly how I ended up as king of Monsalvat, guardian of the Gral.*

After I'd eaten, I made sure the stallion was securely fastened by a lead rein to a firm tree. Like me, he'd wander off, vaguely, if not restrained. I debated whether to remove my mail shirt, decided it was not worth the trouble, wrapped myself in my cloak, put my sword within easy reach, and sat by the fire, because I didn't feel sleepy and wanted the warmth. If I closed my eyes I could see Artus of Britain's court. The great hall, where I'd danced my first dance, where I'd fallen in love... I opened my eyes. I didn't want to remember that. I'd left all that behind me. For a better love.

*"Oh, Parzival, you cannot stay here and wear your soul out in misery, worrying about Gawan. I'll be fine here, with the children. Please, go. But come back to me..."*

Monsalvat is a strange place for one such as I. Too worldly for Monsalvat, too ... dreamy for the world, for my dreams are done in daylight, and I am dangerous... I'd not caused too much havoc on this trip. I'd been to Zazamanc to see my half-brother and my aunt, his wife, now parents to a fine boy, Johannes; then had gone to Artus' court, and was almost glad to be going home, almost glad to be giving up the world... Artus had grown old, and Gwynhwyfar painted her face and acted as if Artus's knights were still her playthings. I wondered, briefly, how I'd have fared if I'd stayed any longer in Britain, because between Jenny's determination and my own stupidity it could have evolved into a real problem. Artus's bastard, Medraut, with his boys from Orkney, had grown strong and brutal, and Gawan, elder of the Orkney clan, had not been there to keep a rein on them. They told me some phantasy about a Green Knight coming to court at the celebration for the birth of the Redeemer, challenging the bravest to sever his head from his body. And of course, Gawan, fair full of bravado (and mead), slipped his latest lady-light-of-heart off his lap and chopped off the Green Knight's head. Which sounds like Gawan. However, the Green Knight rose to his feet, picked up his head and issued a challenge to Gawan to meet him at the Green Chapel in a year and a day to suffer the same blow. Which also sounds like Gawan. He never has over much luck, although he has plenty of enthusiasm.

*And I, who lack luck and enthusiasm, sit by a fire in a forest clearing, waiting...*

My horse whuffled quietly, pricking up its ears. I didn't move but listened. Listened with human ears and inhuman sense. Occasionally useful, my Monsalvat blood. A faint crackle of trodden-upon twigs. Laboured breath, a staggering step. I rose and drew my sword in one fluid movement. Leaned the bare blade on my shoulder, waiting. The crashing of undergrowth came nearer, then stopped as the man saw my fire and halted.

I sighed. "Stranger, if you are cold, draw near and share my fire. I am peaceful." In the dark, the stranger could not see my expression.

"Parzival?" His voice was still rich. "Parse? You describe yourself as peaceful?" He chuckled, and limped into the faint, reddish light. "Well met," he grunted, and sat down, stretching mittened hands to the fire.

I sheathed my sword, sat and regarded him. I could not see his face, so muffled he was by scarves and cloak. My heart beat unevenly, fending off his pain scratching the bleeding edges of my consciousness. I've learned to ward off other's pain, and to lock in my own.

*"Men may be seeming, my son. But trust the good ones."  
"And what is good, mother?"  
I was ever foolish..."*

"Do you go?" I enquired mildly, "to have your head parted from your body, or is this Gawan's ghost?"

He grunted with sour laughter. "I'm real enough. And you? Last I heard..." he broke off, coughing.

I passed him the water bottle. He swore, drank, swore some more. I listened with detached interest. When I'd been younger, fresh from Southern Francia, Gawan had taught me more vulgar words than I'd thought one man could know. *I knew them all now, and a few more besides...*

"So how is," he said nastily, "your Kingdom of the Gral? How did you get leave? By being celibate for a year and a day?"

Surprised, I answered, "Celibate, me? Oh, Redeemer, no." I'd never considered that being elect of the Gral meant sexual abstinence on my part.

"It's nice to know you are like other men," he said, good humour returning. Passed my water bottle back. "That tasted like cat's piss."

"They do a good line in vintage cat's piss in Monsalvat," I said. Took a drink myself. The taste had not improved, or, in fact, worsened.

He chuckled, then peered at me. "I never could tell if you're lying," he said. "I suppose you've changed. Greying, balding maybe, few more lines and slower on the battlefield, but your voice is still the same."

I smiled. In the dark, he could see as much of me as I could him. The morning light would tell. I put a few more twigs on the fire. The wind whisked up a bright flame or two and Gawan drew back, pulling his cloak round his face.

"Gawan?" I said softly. "Tell me..." His pain was nagging me.

He sighed, a deep, acquiescent sound. "You think you're ready for confessional?" He was trying to keep his voice steady.

"I'm a professional," I said. "Remember whence I came." He'd been the one to bring up the Kingdom of the Gral, not I.

Gawan gave a bark of laughter. "And what good does it do you?"

I shrugged, poked at the fire.

Gawan stretched out his hand to the faint warmth. "Very well, then. My story."

I pulled the hood of my cloak closer. The wind was chill.

"I found the Green Knight, at the Green Chapel and he didn't kill me. So here I am."

"Gawan," I murmured. He never was particularly good at telling stories, but at least those he told were real.

He grunted. "I'd like some more to drink," he said.

I pulled my saddle bag closer. Rummaged in it, found the bottle of wine I'd been hoarding. Held it out to him.

"What's this?"

"Different cat's piss," I said. "Do you want some food?"

He was fumbling with the stopper, eager. "I've got bad teeth," he said.

I searched. Found the cheese that wasn't too dry and more stale bread. "Bread'll be all right if you soak it," I said helpfully, passing them over.

He drank, mumbled some bread and cheese, swore a little and settled down again. "That's better," he declared after a while.

"Is it?" I wondered. Biting broken teeth sounded painful.

"Trouble with you, Parse, is that you feel for others too much. And not enough for yourself."

*He'd not heard Anfortas's side of the tale, then. How long did empathy take me then?*

"Your story," I prompted.

Gawan gave a sort of heave, that could have been a yawn. "I'm tired. I've come a long way. I'll tell you tomorrow." He pulled his wrappings close and lay stiffly down. "Thank for the food and drink," he grunted.

"Don't mention it," I said vaguely. Fed a last handful of twigs to the fire and curled up myself. Something made me keep my hand on my sword's hilt. Gawan started snoring, his pain ebbing. I closed my eyes, and seemed to sleep.

The birds woke me, shrieking welcome to the morning. I opened one eye. It was not quite sunrise. I opened the other eye and sat up. The fire had gone out. Warily, I prodded the embers with my bare hand. Nothing. Sat back, sorting out my tangled cloak and sword. Ran a dirty hand through my untidy hair. I found myself imagining, wistfully, a bath.

"Bleedin' crows," said Gawan, and began heaving himself upright.

Waking up myself was bad enough, without Gawan's aches assailing me. I groaned, raised my defences against the world's pain. Gawan got to his feet and staggered a few paces away. Passed water. Re-arranged his clothes and returned.

"I suppose," he said gruffly, "that I'd better be going."

"It's not properly light," I said.

He turned away. His voice became muffled. "Don't tell Artus, will you? That you saw me. I'd rather they thought I was dead."

I stood up. "Your brothers? What do I tell them?"

"Anything you like," he snarled.

He moved, as if to go. I reached and seized his shoulder. He gave a yelp, and I let go, the pain jolting my own arm.

"You never did know your own strength, Parse," he grunted.

"I..." I paused. "Gawan, please..."

"I'm a fraud," he said suddenly. "I'm no hero."

In the half-light I gave a twisted smile. I'd had my fill of heroics, as well.

"What do they say of me, Parzival? In Artus' court? How do they remember me?" His voice was as near pleading as it would ever get.

I considered my reply, then, "That you are truly brave, who honoured a promise of chivalry." He gave a smothered expletive.

"What do they know?" he said. "Promises I've broken..." He broke off with what sounded suspiciously like a sob.

I kept my voice dispassionate (as only I could, oh, Monsalvat hauteur). "That if you die from the blow of the Green Knight, Artus will mourn the passing of a heroic ideal, Gwynhwyfar will mourn her strongest knight."

Gawan gave a howl. "Do you know what I did?" he cried, his voice raw. Swung to face me, but I still couldn't see his expression in the heavy grey of the morning. "I came," he said, getting some measure of control into his tones, "to a fair castle by, they said, the Green Chapel. But before I went to the Chapel, the lord of that castle challenged me to stay three days, the three days before my year and a day were up, and to exchanged gifts with him. I explained I was as I stood, in my armour, without gold or jewels or any other trinket. But he said that I would have something to give him, and went off hunting to fetch my first gift." He paused, swallowed. Somewhere he'd found the words to tell his tale. From the Green Knight, perhaps?

*"And what pretty story have you to tell us, Parzival? They say you command the glory of the Holy Grail."*

*"Lady Gwynhwyfar..."*

*"Jenny, please, when we are alone."*

*"Jenny... They say many things. Not all of them true."*

Gawan continued, "The lady of the castle came to me. She told me I had fair gifts, my body, my ... love." He gave a strangled laugh. "My reputation for dalliance with fair ladies has gone far." He sobered up. "She gave me a kiss. So when the lord returned and displayed the bloody head of the stag he'd slaughtered, I gave him what was already his. A kiss."

I rather wanted to laugh. The old Gawan would have told a dirty joke about Greekish boys and kissing cousins, but because of his pain I said nothing.

"The next day, she gave me two kisses. Which I gave the lord when he returned with the tusks he'd torn from the great wild boar. The third day..." his voice trailed off, then resumed. "The third day, she bound me with a green ribbon, and gave me three kisses."

He was silent. I considered his words.

"Three kisses?" I said, my tone neutral. "Or was it the green ribbon that you wanted?"

He gave a cough of strained amusement. "You can read my mind, Parse, you bastard."

I bent my head. Breathed out. Of course I could read his mind, but there was no way I was going to battle through all that agony just to wrench out his bleeding secret. If he wanted to tell me, he would. I'd not be a voyeur this time.

Gawan shifted, turned his face to the greyish, reddish light on the horizon. "Daylight's coming," he said. "I'll finish my sordid tale, and then go. You can decide who – and what – you tell. That's your punishment for my sin."

*Oh, I was good at accepting punishment, he knew that... Yet I was no son of a god for crucifixion.*

"You're right," continued Gawan. "She told me the green ribbon I could keep, and that it was magic. That wearing it, I would be invulnerable, that no one could kill me." His voice dropped. "So the lord came back to the castle, and said he had had a bad morning's hunting. That all he had for me was the brush of a fox, an old fox, tattered, torn, snagged with briars and crusted with mud. And I gave him his three kisses. He seemed contented, and I left the castle at midday, with the sun beating on my skull, hot and sweaty because of the heat, and, yes, because I'd lied to him."

Dawn was coming.

"I found the Green Chapel," Gawan's voice was becoming richer yet more gravelly. More like his old self. "A cleft in the rocks, with a shrine so old it was most certainly dedicated to other gods than Christ. There was the steady, slow drip of water, the furring of mosses and lichen on the rocky walls. And the Green Knight, with his head back on his shoulders, standing with his great axe, and smiling at me. It was terrible, that smile." He shuddered, in memory. "But I went forward, and boasted that I'd come, that I'd bare my neck for his blow. And soft against my skin lay the green ribbon. I knelt, as he had done, a year and a day back, and he prepared. The green ribbon curled by my heart, yet I flinched from his first blow. He stood back. His smile stayed the same, and he told me to be brave. I waited, and his second blow missed. I didn't smile, and I could feel the sweat prickling on my skin, soaking the green ribbon. So for the third time he made ready and cut down..." He fell silent.

"Saved," I said sweetly, "by a lady's gift."

"No!" he cried. I could almost see his anguished face in the curdling dawn. "Saved by my own fear of death! He didn't mean to kill me, because he was the lord of the castle, because he knew about the green ribbon, because he was to teach me about the nature of heroism, and the falsity of my bravery, and the vacuity of my pride! Oh, Parzival, I've learned a bitter lesson."

*And my lesson? Was it any kinder?*

*"Your punishment will be to learn the enormity of what you have done, or rather what you have not done! Why could you not ask 'What ails you, my uncle?'"*

"You've not done learning yet, Gawan," I said, softly. "When you can bear what you've become, when you can let others see your face, then you'll have reconciled yourself with truth. And realise that, in spite of our ambitions, we cannot live up to half of what people think we should be, or even a fraction of what we ourselves wish to be."

He sucked in his breath.

"You asked me earlier," I said, "what they thought of you at Artus' court. I only told you half the news. They also say that if you return, you will be a better man, for you will have reconciled the death-wish of heroism with the craven will to live. That you will keep a strong curb on the excesses of Medraut and the Orkney faction, who look as like to split the country in uncivil war. So Artus and Gwynhwyfar need you now, like they never did before."

He was pushing back some the wrappings that muffled him. "I've been badly scarred," he said. "The Green Knight took away my beauty."

His body, I knew, had suffered, his stance, his limping had told me that before I'd felt it, but now in the thin light of dawn he shoved back the final muffling cloth and I bit back an exclamation. I should have known. His face, that strong, handsome face, had been damaged, a livid scar running from brow to chin, twisting his eye, his mouth. The ladies would not run so easily to his smile now. But Artus would still trust him, the Orkney faction would still be wary of him.

I gazed at him, then said, "We've all been blighted somehow. You bear your scars outside, for that is where they will hurt you most..."

"And you, Parse? What scars bear you from the years trying to regain the Grail?" His voice was quick and bitter.

"You think I'm untouched?" I asked. "Oh, Gawan. Last night, you wondered if I was greying, or balding, and slower on the battlefield. My scars are different."

The sun was creeping over the horizon. I threw back my hood, and my hair was gilded by the first ray of light.

His jaw dropped. "I couldn't," he said, with difficulty, "live up to that..."

I kept my gaze steady, and hard. If I weakened I'd let fall the treacherous tears that do not heal me.

"It's day," observed Gawan, turning away. He pulled together his cloak, but did not hide his head again. "That your horse?"

"You can have it if you want. You've further to go than I," I said.

He gave a bark of laughter. "No, I'll get along fine as I am. I'm not so sure I'd be comfortable on horseback yet." His brown eyes, wet with pain, smiled at me. "I may even find someone with a fine cart travelling by the way of Artus' court. I could join them."

I released the breath I'd not noticed I'd been holding. "Good journey, then, Gawan."

"You go back to Monsalvat?"

I nodded.

He grunted. "They'll bleed you dry, Parse." He turned to go. "Good journey," he said, and stumped off, brushing bushes aside, even kicking at stones. There was a proud set to his shoulders, in spite of his racked body.

I watched him until he was out of sight, then saddled my horse and pulled it to the water. It drank more willingly this time, and I stepped a little upstream, bent over a pool and splashed some water on my face. Ice-cold, it hurt, rather than refreshed me. And before I'd broken the still surface of the water, I'd glimpsed my own face. A patrician profile, clear carved lines of brow and lips and jaw, framed by a mane of gold. No wonder Gawan had drawn back. I still looked beautiful, and not one day older than when I first stumbled, *so many years ago, oh innocent fool*, from the gates of Monsalvat.